

Iran executes peaceful human rights advocate Ya'qub Mehrnahad

August 21, 2008

"God will bring no change in the conditions of any people unless they themselves set about to change their circumstances. These enlightened and sacred words are providing the motivation for all my activities. I believe that by turning these divine words into action, people can change their own and their society's conditions and move from darkness to light, from injustice, inequality, poverty, and tyranny to the ideals and the legitimate demands of humankind."

These words can be read on the first page of the blog kept by Ya'qub Mehrnahad, who was [executed on August 4, 2008](#). Although it attracted no international news coverage or official reaction, his death shocked human rights advocates who see in his case an escalation of violence by the Islamic Republic against its peaceful opponents. A 28-year-old father of three from Balūchestān*, Mehrnahad was the president of the Youth Voice of Justice Association (YVJA), a legally-registered organization, founded in 2002, that focuses on accountability, education and training, discrimination, and civic responsibility. He also worked for a local publication called *Mardomsalary* (Democracy).

Mehrnahad was arrested in May 2007 on charges of being a member of Jondollah, an armed group which engages in violent opposition to the Iranian government, just after he led the YVJA's fifth annual "Question and Answer" session with local authorities, at which participants discussed local problems.

Mehrnahad was held incommunicado for five months and was reportedly tortured during interrogations that continued even after his closed door trial. At no time during his interrogation or trial was he allowed access to legal counsel.

Throughout his trial, Mehrnahad rejected the charge of having associated with an armed group. In fact, rejecting violence had been one of the central themes of his campaign as a civil society activist. When, in 2006, the authorities rejected his candidacy for a city council position, he noted:

"Some expected that by rejecting [my] candidacy, they would attract young people into the arena of violent struggle, ... but they ignore the fact that young people are too aware and know how to fight for their ideals without violence. We will pursue a wide-scale struggle against monopoly and

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tyranny by rejecting violence. We are convinced that the future is ours, and we will succeed by acting wisely and by rejecting violence, because if the oppressed use violence as do the oppressors, there is no difference between them."

The execution of a civil society actor, whose peaceful activities were aimed at addressing the root causes of violence, does not bode well for the future of the human rights community in Iran. Nor does it encourage other Iranians to use peaceful means to call for their legitimate rights. The current escalation of violence in Iran is reminiscent of the post-revolutionary years, when the newly established Islamic Regime consolidated its hold on power by eliminating all voices of dissent and [terrorizing Iranian civil society](#).

The execution of Mr. Mehrnahad was not inevitable. In contrast to the early years following the Islamic Revolution, today the Iranian government feels compelled to recognize, at least on paper, the rights of its citizens. It has created human rights bodies and issued guidelines on the treatment of prisoners. Iran also takes an active stand on some human rights issues at the United Nations, demanding understanding for cultural differences and boasting about its efforts to eliminate discrimination.**

Away from the international arena, however, the Islamic Republic views with hostility those who peacefully question its discriminatory laws and practices. The Iranian authorities detain and charge [students](#), [journalists](#), and peaceful rights advocates with "[crimes against National security](#)." Even [doctors](#) dedicated to the treatment and prevention of AIDS are not immune from absurd political accusations.

The government cannot punish Iranians' peaceful attempts to associate and to promote their ideas and yet claim political and moral legitimacy. The Islamic Republic's leaders' claim to religious legitimacy is undermined when they systematically silence Muslim clerics who oppose their interpretation of Islam, intimidate or eliminate leaders and members of religious minorities, and threaten Muslims converts to other faiths with capital punishment.

The execution, imprisonment, or the intimidation of activists who question peacefully the state's ideology and practices, is symptomatic of the Islamic Republic's inability to defend, morally and rationally, its laws and practices. Isolating the Iranian human rights activists and punishing journalists who relay their voices to the outside world is a sign of weakness rather than might. The recent and serious threats, in the semi-official *Kayhan* newspaper, against women's rights activists campaigning to end legal discrimination is the latest illustration of the government's inability to justify itself and adapt to a modernizing society. The Iranian government

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could and should have been confronted for arresting and sentencing to death Ya'qub Mehrnahad, an activist who fought peacefully against [ethnic and religious discrimination in a region](#) plagued by violence.***

In the absence of any strong international reaction to the execution of Mr. Mehrnahad, the Iranian government may consider itself free to execute other rights activists and civil society actors, such as [Farzad Kamangar](#), [Adnan Hassanpour](#), [Hiva Boutimar](#), [Habibollah Latifi](#) (currently hospitalized after a three-months detention by the Iranian Intelligence), and many others, already sentenced to death on trumped-up charges. Many prisoners of conscience remain at risk in Iranian prisons. Ayatollah [Seyed Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi](#)'s situation is of particular concern, as he has been denied proper medical care and is in critical condition. The continued [detentions of Baha'is](#) and [Christians](#) is also especially worrisome in light of the suspicious stabbings of Zoroastrian**** activists in Europe, such as Manouchehr Farhangi (March 20, 2008, Madrid, Spain), and the death, in Esfahan, of a Muslim convert to Christianity, Mr. Abbas Amiri, who was reportedly beaten severely when reportedly plainclothes security officers raided his home on July 17th, 2008.

The Iranian government has skillfully used its nuclear ambitions to distract the international community from paying due attention to the sharp increase in the [number of executions in Iran](#) (81 in July alone) and its daily crackdown on civil society. However, the two problems are related and may be mutually reinforcing. The absence of consistent attention by the international community to the internal repression leaves the situation of Iranian rights activists precarious. It also may encourage the Iranian government to continue its current intransigent posture and to exploit the nuclear negotiations as a means of obtaining a free hand in quashing the still surviving voices of dissent inside Iran.

In recent years, Iran has witnessed the birth of a peaceful democratic [civil rights movement](#) spearheaded by women, students, and ethnic and religious minorities. Civil rights activists, free from politics, refer only to universal human rights principles; this is a new and unprecedented phenomenon in this country and a necessary development for future peace and stability in the region. The emerging pattern of death sentences against peaceful advocates indicates the government's resolve to annihilate Iran's newly born civil rights movement.

The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation calls upon the Iranian government to stop the execution of civil rights activists and urges the international community to use all available leverage to obtain the revocation of all death and prison sentences prescribed against peaceful Iranian civil

rights advocates.

* Sistān o Balūchestān (Persian: استان سیستان و بلوچستان) is one of the 30 provinces of Iran. It is in the southeast of the country, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan, and its capital is Zahedan. The province is the largest in Iran, with an area of 181,785 km² and a population of 4.1 million. The region is also home to Iran's Baluchi Sunni minority. In Wikipedia. With an estimated 2 to 3% of the Iranian population, is one of the most under-resourced regions in Iran in terms of education and access to food, clean water, and basic health. Its inhabitants are mostly ethnic Baluchi and are Sunni Muslims. (See: <http://www.undp.org.ir/reports/npd/CCA.pdf>)

** - "The judiciary power of the Islamic Republic has also worked out a bill of citizens rights. One of the main principles incorporated in this bill ensures the enjoyment of every person of equal rights so that his individual rights and freedoms are guaranteed, irrespective of his ethnic origin and other factors such as race, color, sex, etc..." Letter of the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Anti-Discrimination Unit of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 14 March, 2008.

*** Based on ABF's findings, in 2007, an estimated 15% of the officially reported executions took place in Baluchistan.

**** Followers of Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. It was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) in ancient Iran approximately 3500 years ago. For 1000 years Zoroastrianism was the official religion of Persia (Iran) from 600 BCE to 650 CE. It is now one of the world's smallest religions with around a quarter of a million followers worldwide. The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the eventual establishment of the Islamic Republic posed many initial setbacks for religious minorities. Today, the Zoroastrian community in Iran is estimated by some to number some 22,000 - half the size of that in existence before the 1979 Islamic revolution.